**‘Holding Space’ in a Climate of Social Distancing**

**By Sue Whiteley, March 30, 2020**

Almost all of us get it now! “Keep your distance!” More precisely, keep a moat of 1.5m between you and another person.

In the coming months as we encounter a season of home hibernation, our souls will seek and need rich emotional connections from others in order to sustain health and vibrancy.

While we must obey the laws of the land and keep sustained physical distance, on an emotional level, we need more of the opposite, sustained emotional connection. Through our screens and phone-calls, Pastors will need to wade across the emotional moat and press into the internal worlds of others to check on their inner spiritual, emotional and mental health.

Psychologists call the ability to connect across to another soul and sustain a deep fruitful interaction ‘holding space with others.’

Holding space with others means opening your heart to others (across the physical divide) and being truly available for another to share honestly and at depth about how they are really experiencing life in this season. The ‘holding’ includes holding back the reflex to rush into squash, limit, diminish or rationalize the pain. ‘Holding Space’ effectively means that rather than become rescuers, we hear and touch hearts in deep places with love and understanding.

Rather than moving pastorally amongst people with ‘Jet-ski’ speed, ‘holding space’ has more the feel of deep-sea diving into the depths of another person’s world.

On the receiving end, when we feel ‘felt’, or deeply listened to, then somebody has been effectively ‘holding space’ for us. It is a great gift for others.

Famous Irish Priest John O’Donohue wrote in his book *Anam Cara*

*“All during the course of our lives we struggle to catch up with ourselves. We are so taken up, so busy and distracted that we cannot dedicate enough time or recognition to the depths within us. We endeavor to see ourselves and meet ourselves; yet there is such complexity in us and so many layers to the human heart that we rarely ever encounter ourselves.”*

When we ‘hold space’ for people- we allow them to catch up with themselves, we dedicate time and help them recognize the depths in them. We help them see and meet themselves. We allow them to fall into the complexity of their own soul, without judgement. Layer by layer, we allow them to encounter themselves, without defiling their system with our systems overload.

Going forward in this season, we will all continue to hear others express the pain of financial loss, unrelenting loneliness and tedious boredom. Our ministry will continue as we ‘hold space’ by leaning in (not physically) but emotionally. Sustaining soft loving eye contact, showing tenderness in our tone, keeping our own stories out, not rushing to dull their pain with a text or a platitude. Offering them a chance to encounter and discover their own internal God given spiritual resources rather than emptying our own onto them.

This season is traumatic, and all people’s worlds need to be witnessed by another to feel felt and held. Here are 6 qualities of those who hold space well.

**Qualities of People who ‘hold space’ well**

1. **They have clean and clear interior spaces. They have interior spaciousness**.

We each have an opportunity to do some physical house sorting in the mandatory house hibernating. But this can be an ideal season for interior heart spring cleaning as well.

Take an hour and do some interior house cleaning. If we are filled with interior clutter, then we can’t exhibit a spaciousness that demonstrates patience and spaciousness when others are filled with their own pain. Grappling with memories of those who are hard to forgive might be a starting place. The goal is to clear and sort out our inner garbage. This is a great topic to raise at your next supervision or mentoring hour.

When we have clear interior space, others can find calm and unhurriedness in our tone and texture of presence, rather than a preoccupied and distracted presence.

1. **People who hold space well are undefended.**

We can present with one of two stances: undefended or defended. An undefended person is someone who has no axe to grind. They are focused but not driven. They hold clear positions on topics but are free to argue them or not. In contrast, a defensive person is always on guard. They hold strong internal fences that guard their ego, their views and standpoints to an extreme.

People who hold space well with others have intentionally lowered their inner defences and can welcome another into their world, or likewise enter freely the world of another without any compulsion to have to correct, judge or fix another. They are non-reactionary to the ideas and thoughts of another. They respect the differing views and emotions of another.

Each of us quite frequently have a few well engrained defense mechanisms that get triggered. Our defenses are largely out of our consciousness until we are threatened. Then our internal fences fly up quite suddenly. A few common ones are denial, deflection, blaming, projecting our faults onto others, fear, competing, criticizing are all commonly used defenses. Even rescuing others from pain is a defense mechanism. The question here is: from what are we defending?

It is almost impossible to ‘hold space’ when our own internal fences or walls are up.

Our ego, as our resident image controller, is at the basis of most of our defense mechanisms, and does a fine job keeping us looking good when we are threatened. But unfortunately, people are acutely aware of reactive and defensive people and chose not to openly share with them. One of the primary reasons that Professional Supervision or mentoring is so useful is, that we can check in with our degree of defensiveness that operates in ministry and explore how it might be hiding in the way we speak or conduct ourselves.

In this season we need to listen to the pain of others without any defense, neither of ourselves, of God or their situation. Validating peoples personal pain has a healing power all its own.

**3. People who hold space well have verbal control honed through the spiritual practice of ‘Silence.’**

Silence helps us reign in the need to talk and trains us to listen more. Its far more important to listen than talk. That goes for prayer too. Silence helps to clear the space so the other can tumble out their overbearing amount of inner stuff to process.

Those who hold space well know how to zip the lip. More than that, they can house their silence and hold their silence in a way that betters connection with themselves.

When we silently listen to the pain of others, our silence has a ‘witnessing’ texture to it. It is silence that encultures a deep connection.

When we hold space with others our words are very few. Short simple responses that are apt and short.

**4. People who hold space well have boundary control honed through the spiritual practice of ‘Solitude.’**

Solitude cures us from our addiction to people and addiction to attending to people needs that can masquerade as ministry. Solitude cracks upon our addictions to seeing our best self-mirrored in the faces of those we serve. It can be a brutal dry-out.

In solitude, enforced or not, we seek God’s presence to comfort but where his presence is hard to feel, we must process his seeming absence. Ironically, when we know ‘absence’ thoroughly, we are better placed to value the deep-felt presence of God.

In solitude we find our boundaries. We find where we start and finish. This is very difficult to define when we engage with lots of people. But in solitude all the mirrors that reflect our worth or lack of it are gone and we come face to face with only ourselves and our feelings about ourselves. There the work of tender love for our own selves begins.

It is virtually impossible to care for others in healthy ways if we are unable to be alone with ourselves.

Blaise Pascal once said, “All of humanities problems stem from man’s inability to sit quietly in a room with himself.”

And Thomas a Kempis in his book *The Imitation of Christ* wrote “Unless you like solitude it is not safe for you to appear in Public.”

What solitude powerfully teaches us is where we start and finish. And this is paramount in this season, where we are pastorally hearing stories of loss, fear and depression daily. Those who hold space well can listen to pastoral pain, then returning home, differentiating the pain of others from your own pain and not carrying the weight of the world into your own home. Taking a physical and virtual emotional shower washing off the weight of others might be a lifesaving practice in this coming season.

People who hold space well are people who have become grounded through solitude

When we hold space with others, and we are not practiced in solitude we will invade their space with our own form of denied pain. Most of us have great intentions, intentions that seem spiritual, we want people to have breakthroughs, to grow spiritually, but all the while these seemingly holy virtues hold our own fears of inadequacy and invalidation.

Solitude will eventually cure us from using ministry to bolster our own flagging egos.

When we hold space, we do not have to do anything. Let people have their own walk, their own experiences. We do not need to ferry them, push them, coax them, hurry them.

We take them to the feet of Jesus through our silence and holding and we leave them there.

People who hold space well, know where their work finishes, and God’s work starts. They hold people right there at the brink and wait for God to move, rather than rescuing. They have patience for God to initiate and don’t need to craft, well-meaning but artificial pathways to God.

**5. People who hold space well have body/mind control honed through spiritual practice of stillness.**

Mary held space at Jesus feet while Martha couldn’t be still. Mary sat at Jesus’ feet.

In stillness, the soul can feel its inner most motivations. Some of us are addicted to compulsive action a bit like Martha was in her situation. We rush to fix, to blame, to rescue, to manage.

‘Holding space’ is the suspension of our own reactive measures to take control of what the person is feeling in either an active or a passive way. We can subtly offer frames, views, mental modes that give the person perspective in ways that are more about our way of seeing the world than theirs.

True ‘holding space’ has none of that. Holding space is maintaining body and mind control even when the person we are with, says something heretical, stupid, contrary to our view.

Validating or witness their world, does not mean we have to agree with every thought they express.

We merely reflect back, their own logic, enabling them to hear and grapple more with what they are expressing. Perhaps when they hear themselves clearer, it will sound jarring or stupid, then they can make their own mental or spiritual adjustments.

We see Jesus on the Thursday evening before he died, asking for his disciples to hold space for him. He was not beyond the neediness of having others to witness and validate his own turmoil when he asked his disciple to “Wait here with me.”

Sadly, his disciples didn’t have the body control that was needed at the time to be able to host him in his needy hour.

**6. Lastly, People who hold space well practice TZIMZUM**

*Tzimtzum* is not a word found in Scripture, but the Hebrew concept is. It might be simply explained as the ability to contract yourself for the creation of space for another.

John the Baptist (John 3:30) was practicing *Tzimzum* when we expressed the sentiment “He must increase, I must decrease.” One might suggest that God practiced *Tzimzum* when he had to contract his own light, but not essence when we created a universe for us to live in.

When we hold space with others, we need to *Tzimtzum*, contract ourselves in order to create a holding container for the other person to expand into. This entails, contracting our desire to speak, share our stories, give our views, not to lose them, but to make space for the new, the other.

Perhaps Jesus held back his power at the cross so that something else could happen in that space.

Holding space is a time where *Tzimtzum* is practiced by those who are freed up by an inner spaciousness, cooperating ego, practices of silence, solitude and stillness, so that they can contract calmly and fittingly for the set amount of time, in order for another person to be an appropriate focus.

**Summary**

In this unprecedented season, hibernating in our homes, we do have access to amazing social media that can transport us into the homes of lots of others. The kind of presence we transmit is always crucial as pastors. Perhaps the only powerful thing we can do in this current climate is to ‘hold space’ with others well. It is the bread and butter work of chaplaincy, pastoring, spiritual mentoring, counselling and supervision, but it is now the critical thing we need to teach others including our children.

When we hold space well, the spirit of others can be validated, opened and given fresh spiritual breath in this trying time.